

1656

[The Case of Ann Hibbins, Executed for Witchcraft at Boston in 1656]

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[The Case of Ann Hibbins, Executed for Witchcraft at Boston in 1656] *

The third execution for witchcraft in Boston was on June 19, 1656, and Mrs. Ann Hibbins was the victim. She was the widow of William Hibbins, a leading merchant of Boston and one of the most honored citizens of the colony, who died in 1654. He was deputy to the General Court in 1641–42, and Assistant from 1643 to the day of his death. He served the colony as its agent in England; and being a man of wealth and high social position, his wife had mingled in the best society of Boston. It is said by Mr. Drake and others that she was the sister of Richard Bellingham, who was Governor in 1641 and Deputy-Governor at the time of her execution. That a woman occupying such a social position should have come to such an ignominious death, is a strange incident in the case. Another is, that not a particle of the contemporary evidence on which she was convicted has been preserved. Governor Winthrop had died, and the two Mathers had not yet come upon the stage, or we should have had copious details. Governor Hutchinson, who wrote more than a century later, gave, partly from Hubbard and partly from tradition or conjecture, some incidents which help to fill out the picture.

She was first tried and condemned in 1655 ; but the magistrates set aside the verdict, and she was brought for trial before the General Court. The Records, under the date of May 14, 1656, give the following: —

“The magistrates not receiving the verdict of the jury in Mrs. Hibbins her case, having been on trial for witchcraft, it came and fell of course to the General Court. Mrs. Ann Hibbins was called forth, appeared at the bar; the indictment against her was read, to which she answered not guilty, and was willing to be tried by God and this Court. The evidences against her were read, the parties witnessing being present, her answers considered on; and the whole Court being met together, by their vote determined that Mrs. Ann Hibbins is guilty of witchcraft, according to the bill of indictment found against her by the jury of life and death. The Governor in open Court pronounced sentence accordingly, declaring she was to go from the bar to

* From William F. Poole, “Witchcraft in Boston,” in Volume II, Chapter IV of Justin Winsor, ed., *The Memorial History of Boston* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881) pp. 138-141.

the place from whence she came, and from thence to the place of execution, and there to hang till she was dead.

“It is ordered, that warrant shall issue out from the Secretary to the Marshal-General, for the execution of Mrs. Hibbins on the 5th day next come fortnight, presently after the lecture at Boston, being the 19th of June next, the Marshal-General taking with him a sufficient guard.”¹

Governor Hutchinson, in 1765, wrote of the case as follows: —

“The most remarkable occurrence in the colony in the year 1655 was the trial and condemnation of Mrs. Ann Hibbins for witchcraft. . . . Losses in the latter part of her husband’s life had reduced his estate and increased the natural crabbedness of his wife’s temper, which made her turbulent and quarrelsome, brought her under church censure,² and at length rendered her so odious to her neighbors as to cause some of them to accuse her of witchcraft. The jury brought her in guilty, but the magistrates refused to accept the verdict; so the cause came to the General Court, where the popular clamor prevailed against her, and the miserable woman was condemned and executed. Search was made upon her body for teats, and in her chests and boxes for puppets, images, etc.; but there is no record of anything of that sort being found. . . . It fared with her as it did with Joan of Arc in France, — some counted her a saint and some a witch, and some observed solemn marks of Providence set upon those who were very forward to condemn her.”³

There was doubtless in the case of Ann Hibbins, as there was in that of Margaret Jones, the cruel “searching” and “watching,” the finding of witch-marks and imps. The majority of her judges were not Boston men, and would not be carried away by the local prejudice against her as a turbulent and quarrelsome woman. They would have required the proofs prescribed in the law books. Hugh Parsons, though convicted by a local jury, was acquitted by the General Court; and apparently because in the great mass of depositions as to his bad disposition, his ominous shaking of the head, uttering threats, cutting puddings when boiling in the bag, whetting saws at night, and drying up milch cows, there was no testimony as to witch-marks and imps.⁴

Mrs. Hibbins was a widow, named Moore, when she married her late husband, and had three sons residing in England. The youngest son, hearing of his mother’s troubles, embarked for America, and probably arrived before her execution. Her will, dated May 27, 1656, is in the Suffolk Probate records,⁵ and is a calm, well-worded, and sensible document. She named as the overseers and administrators of her estate (appraised at £344 14s.), Thomas Clarke, Edward Hutchinson, William Hudson, **Joshua Scottow**, and Peter Oliver. Thomas Clarke was one of the two deputies of Boston in the General Court;

Joshua Scottow and Peter Oliver were selectmen, and the others were leading citizens of the town. In a codicil to her will she says: "I do earnestly desire my loving friends Captain [Edward] Johnson and Mr. Edward Rawson to be added to the rest of the gentlemen mentioned as overseers of my will, to whom I commit, namely, to Capt. Johnson['s] care and trust my two chests and desk with all things therein, to be kept entirely whole and in kind, till my [eldest] son John, or his order, authenticated by a public notary, shall come and demand the same." Captain Johnson was the deputy from Woburn, and author of *Wonder-working Providence of Sion's Saviour in New England*, London, 1654; and Mr. Rawson was Secretary of the General Court. To Mr. Rawson she delivered the keys of her chests and desk, and also her papers. "My desire is that all my overseers would be pleased to show so much respect for my dead corpse as to cause it to be decently interred, and, if it may be, near my late husband." Three days before her execution, hearing that her son was coming, she added this provision to her will: "I give my son Jonathan twenty pounds over and above what I have already given him, towards his pains and charge in coming to see me, which shall be first paid out of my estate." On the morning of her execution she made this further addition: "My further mind and will is (sic), out of my sense of the more than ordinary affection and pains of my son Jonathan in the times of my distress, I give him, as a further legacy, ten pounds."

It is evident from the quality of the persons whom she chose as the overseers of her estate, the reasons she assigns for her choice, and other expressions in her will, that she had friends in her distress who sought to save her from her dreadful doom. Some of this sympathy seems to have found public expression in very positive terms; for **Mr. Joshua Scottow**, nine months later, found it necessary to apologize to the General Court for what he had said or done with reference to the matter. His apology is preserved in the *Massachusetts Archives*, cxxxv. 1.⁶ He stated that he did not intend to oppose the proceedings of the General Court in the case of Mrs. Ann Hibbins:

"I am cordially sorry that anything from me, either in word or writing, should give offence to the honored Court, my dear brethren in the church, or any others."

How the two noted ministers of Boston, John Wilson and John Norton, regarded the condemnation and execution of Mrs. Hibbins is shown by a story which Governor Hutchinson relates:—

"Mr. Beach, a minister in Jamaica, in a letter to Dr. Increase Mather in the year 1684, says: 'You may remember what I have sometimes told you your famous Mr. [John] Norton once said at his own table before Mr. [John] Wilson, Elder [James] Penn, and myself and wife, etc., who had the honor to be his guests,—that the wife of one of your magistrates, as I remember, was hanged for a witch only for having more wit than her neighbors. It was his

very expression ; she having, as he explained it, unhappily guessed that two of her persecutors, whom she saw talking in the street, were talking of her, — which cost her her life, notwithstanding all he could do to the contrary, as he himself told us” (i. 173).

Increase Mather, seventeen years of age, was graduated from Harvard College the same month that Ann Hibbins was executed, and Cotton Mather was born seven years later. These names are to appear frequently in the subsequent records. It is evident there was some superstition in the colony before the time of these notable men. That neither of them, in their numerous papers on witchcraft, ever mentioned the case of Mrs. Hibbins may possibly be explained by the feeling they had in common with Mr. Norton and Mr. Wilson, that she had been unjustly condemned.

Notes

1 *Mass. Rec*; iv. pt. i. 269.

2 [A MS. volume by Captain Keayne in the Massachusetts Historical Society’s cabinet contains reports of Cotton’s sermons and some of the proceedings of the church in cases of discipline, particularly that of Mrs. Hibbins. — ED.] [Winsor’s note]

3 *History of Massachusetts*, i. 173, edition of 1795. “Others have said that Mr. Hibbins, losing £500 at once by the carelessness of Mr. Trerice the shipmaster, it so discomposed his wife’s spirit that she scarce ever was well settled in her mind afterwards, but grew very turbulent in her passion and discontented, on which occasion she was cast out of the church, and then charged to be a witch, giving too much occasion, by her strange carriage, to common people so to judge.” — Hubbard, *General History of New England*, p. 574.

4 Thomas Cooper, appointed to watch Mary Parsons, testified that she spoke very bitterly of her husband, and said she could prove he was a witch ; to which Cooper replied : “Methinks, if he were a witch, there would be some apparent sign or mark of it upon his body, for they say witches have teats upon some part or other of their body; but so far as I hear there is not any such apparent thing upon his body, — which she did not deny.” Drake, *Annals*, p. 245.

5 [The will is in the *N. E. Hist. and Geneal. Reg.*, July, 1852, p. 283. The inventory is dated April 30, 1657, and shows “a gold weding ring, a diamond ring, a taffety cloake, silk gown and kirtle, pinck colored petticoat,” etc., with “money in the desk.” — ED.] [Winsor’s note]

6 [This paper, the signature to which is herewith given, is the first in a volume labelled “Witchcraft Papers,” in the *Massachusetts Archives*, at the State House. Scottow

survived the greater witchcraft folly of 1692, and died Jan. 20, 1697-98. Sewall records,
“Jan. 21. It seems Capt. Scottow died the last night. Thus the New England men drop
away. Jan. 22. Capt. Joshua Scottow is buried in the old burying-place. Extream cold. No
minister at funeral; nor wife nor daughter.” Sewall was one of the bearers (ii. 467).— ED.)
[Winsor’s note]

Boston Lib 7: (1.) $\frac{1655}{36}$
J. see obituary
Josh. Scottow